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Urban Teachers Engaging in Critical Talk: Navigating Deficit Discourse and Neoliberal Logics

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Abstract

This article examines urban teachers' critiques—their *critical talk*—as moments of agency, and as potential, but tenuous, avenues for transformation. The article draws on data from a qualitative interpretive study examining the complexities of urban teachers' work. This research begins from a perspective that is attentive to and critical of both (a) the racialized *deficit discourse*, a predominant framework in urban schools—often taken up by urban teachers—that constructs poor urban youth and youth of color as deficient, as objects in need of control and correction; and (b) *neoliberal approaches to education*, particularly the market-based, audit culture logics and practices that devalue, discipline, and target teachers as workers. This research examines how urban teachers navigated both deficit and neoliberal logics, and it offers a theoretical framework to understand teachers' critiques to these logics as a kind of agency. Findings suggest that despite urban teachers' being critical of the neoliberal pressures that constrained their work, the deficit discourse constructed urban students *themselves* as primary constraints for teachers. Deficit discourse was not all-encompassing, and some teachers resisted it, but deficit thinking seemed to intensify in conjunction with neoliberalism, and it cut short the potential of urban teachers' critique.

Keywords: deficit thinking, urban education, teacher labor, neoliberalism

It is significant to note that through the hegemonic process of standardized testing, teachers, as workers, have become the new scapegoat of the system. As a result of the political struggles in education rooted in the civil rights era, it became unfashionable to blame students, their parents, or their culture. Teachers, whose status is located at the next lowest rung of the educational hierarchy, became the most likely suspects. (Darder, 2005, p. 214)

This article examines how urban teachers navigate two forces that shape their work in urban schools: (a) the racialized *deficit discourse* that constructs poor urban youth and youth of color as deficient, as objects in need of control and correction; and (b) *neoliberal approaches to education*, particularly the market-based, audit culture logics and practices that devalue, discipline, and target teachers as workers. Concerned with the harmful effects of deficit thinking for students in urban schools, this work also explores how neoliberal logics, aside from their constraining effects on teachers' work, might maintain deficit thinking. Neoliberalism, indeed, helps to construct teachers as objects of blame—as the most likely suspects—and the urban teachers in my study were critical of being targeted for school problems. However, urban teachers also, in turn, engaged in deficit thinking that blamed urban students and their families—unfashionable as this practice may be, or *not*.

This article draws on data from a larger study on the complexity of urban teachers' labor. I examine how neoliberalism—particularly the practices of accounting, efficiency, and surveillance that shape teachers' labor—intersects with and helps to preserve deficit logics within urban schools. Specifically, I explore instances when urban teachers engaged in what I call *critical talk*. These critical moments highlight how deficit thinking and neoliberalism, while not the same, are interrelated. Through their critique of the practices that restrained them or scapegoated them as individual teachers, the urban teachers offered a glimpse, a potential, of how school might be structured *otherwise*. Rather than follow this budding critique of neoliberal practices through, however, the teachers often activated deficit discourse and ended up recasting urban students and families as the real problem in urban schools.

Purpose

This research begins with a critical view of the current neoliberal context in which public school teachers—in urban schools and elsewhere—are devalued, and it also joins with scholars who research and write against the deficit thinking that characterizes *urban* schools, particularly. Neoliberalism insists that privatization, competition, and individual-as-entrepreneur subjectivities are needed in all realms of social life—not just in the business or accounting world (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Peters, 2001). While neoliberalism promises freedom, choice, and self-determination under the rules of the market, it actually results in an audit culture of continual evaluation and measurement (Apple, 2005). Teachers, seen as leeching off of the public rather than being good, efficient, free-market entrepreneurs on their own, must be brought into the neoliberal logics of competition (Apple, 2005, p. 15). Educational scholars have studied how neoliberalism reshapes the so-called good teacher (Connell, 2009; Lipman, 2004) and redefines teacher quality (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) in harmful, constricting manners. Under the neoliberal restructuring of their work, teachers have become demoralized (Santoro, 2011) and have turned to “surviving” rather than “thriving” (Nieto, 2009, p. 8).

Social justice and urban education researchers have demonstrated that deficit thinking, a framework that blames and misrepresents poor people and people of color, predominates in urban schools (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Delpit, 1995; García & Guerra, 2004; Gorski, 2013; Valencia, 1997; 2010; Weiner, 2003). This deficit discourse is a racialized approach that constructs urban students as lacking; that faults Black and Latin@ students, communities, and their cultures for the state of their schools; that ignores students as resources; that often results in excessive attempts to control students perceived to be out-of-control; and that lowers expectations for student achievement. Through deficit thinking, there is a “tattooing...of ‘lack’ onto most Black, Latino, immigrant, and/or poor students” (Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 20).

Understanding deficit discourse, and its underlying racist, classist ideologies, is helpful in understanding how oppression works in this era of color-blind racism with seemingly few racists—few people who take ownership of consciously racist attitudes or practices (Applebaum, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Leonardo, 2013; Omi & Winant, 1994). Circulating *race-blind* discourses allow individuals to talk about race in a veiled manner, and to carry out racist practices without having to name them as such. Omi and Winant (1994) point out that starting in the 1960s, it became in bad taste to be outwardly racist and that “racial equality had to be acknowledged as a desirable goal” (p. 117). Within urban schools (and elsewhere), deficit discourse provides people a way to maintain racist ideas about youth of color without exposing that racism. The term *urban* itself carries negative, known, assumed, socially-constructed

baggage and is often a coded way to talk about race (as well as class). As Watson (2011) found, educators often divide students into two groups—urban and normal—with *urban* referring to Black and Latin@ students and meaning *less than*. Through the shared meanings of deficit discourse and the conventions of color-blind ideology, a teacher in Watson’s study could claim that urban students “can’t see the value of education” (p. 50) without fear of being called out on her racism, while, simultaneously, allowing the racist meaning to come through loud and clear.

I consider how neoliberal logics paint urban teachers as deficient, similarly to how deficit discourse inscribes itself onto urban students. But more than similar, this research suggests that deficit and neoliberal discourses are *intertwined*. They maintain one another, and urban teachers navigate them both. This research shines a light on urban teachers, not to add to their hypervisibility as problems, but rather to understand how their status *as problems* complicates their work and potentially allows deficit explanations about their urban students to go uninterrupted. The research is part of a larger, qualitative interpretive study tracing urban teachers’ experiences of teaching in two urban educational contexts: Teach For America (TFA), a national program that recruits college graduates to teach in poor schools; and Project Voice,¹ a small, university-based research project in Upstate City, a mid-sized city in the northeast. I was a researcher on the Project Voice project, which aimed to develop a model for adults to collaborate with urban students to improve their schools. This multi-sited ethnography asked how urban teachers in these two different settings negotiated their contradictory social positions of having little power over their work but considerable power over their students; it examined, particularly, how teachers navigated neoliberal constraints and deficit discourse. It explored how teachers in urban schools made meaning of their work, their students, and their identities as urban teachers.

Methods

Research Sites

It is significant to study how teachers from TFA and Project Voice negotiate deficit discourse because both programs strive to have high expectations for urban students and to improve urban education—at least at the level of the projects’ missions. Both programs are concerned with educational inequality but understand and approach the problem of inequality differently. Project Voice was a two-year project that involved three teachers working in an urban K-8 public school in Upstate City. These teachers grew up in or around Upstate City, they became teachers through the traditional route, and they are still working in the district today. TFA teachers join a competitive organization that is popular among young people, they go through a much shorter alternative training route, and they are required to teach for only two years. Studying teachers from these two contexts in tandem permits examination of how blaming discourses are taken up at different levels and in different locations. Because both TFA and Project Voice intend to *counter* deficit thinking to some degree (even if not in that language), they are contexts where the circulation of such discourse is more discernable. Investigating how the discourse continued to circulate even as many of the urban teachers intended to resist it is needed to better understand and challenge deficit thinking.

Project Voice was a funded project that worked with urban middle school students and teachers to make films about school, positioning students as experts on their schooling experiences, and intending to combat the deficit discourse. Rooted in the new sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Lee, 2001) and student voice literature (Cook-Sather,

2002; Mitra, 2007), the project wanted to understand students as subjects rather than objects of reform. The three teacher participants from the first year of fieldwork were respected teachers whom we chose to take part because they were known to have high expectations for students.

Studying TFA teachers allows me to explore how not all urban teachers are created equal. While most urban teachers and other public school teachers are not highly regarded (Biklen, 1995), TFA is seen as a competitive, trendy program (Azimi, 2007). TFA urban teachers escape some of the blame put on ordinary urban teachers, so their negotiations with neoliberal logics are somewhat different from those of other teachers (Pitzer, 2010). The TFA teachers in this study sometimes blamed *other*, non-TFA teachers for the problems of urban schooling; TFAers understood their own presence in urban schools as a response to the supposed faults of other teachers. As one Project Voice teacher described it, TFA teachers are seen as “doing something for the higher order,” whereas a teacher like her is considered “just status quo that mooches on the system.” However, these traditional teachers involved in Project Voice also picked up the neoliberal logic of competition and strict individualism and sometimes blamed other teachers for the problems that urban schools faced (Pitzer, 2014b).

Data and Procedures

This qualitative study employed discourse analysis to examine the social structures underlying language (Rapley, 2007), and a multi-sited ethnographic approach, an approach that makes connections between seemingly separate sites, to seek the “...chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations...” (Marcus, 1995, p. 105). This design is well-suited to studying discourse because it “shifts attention from the actual places where things happen to focus on how meanings get taken up, shift, and circulate across different situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 76). Multi-sited ethnography allowed me to trace how the deficit discourse shifted as it entwined with neoliberal logics and how teachers across different urban settings negotiated it in their talk.

Data sources include transcripts from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers from both TFA and Project Voice. This approach meant that I came to the interviews with a guiding set of questions, but I had flexibility in exploring new themes as the participants talked. Semi-structured interviews require that the researcher be “open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions” (Hatch, 2002, p. 94). Qualitative interviewing emphasizes participants’ meaning-making efforts and can unearth teachers’ assumptions and the taken-for-granted values in urban schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In using probes and asking follow-up questions, I aimed to draw out “depth and detail” about urban teachers’ perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). I interviewed ten TFA teachers—current and former—from urban districts throughout the country. Central data for Project Voice are transcriptions from one and a half years of weekly meetings with the three original teachers involved in the project, as well as in-depth interviews with each teacher.

Theoretical Framework

Theorizing Neoliberalism and Deficit Discourse

While many scholars have documented the multiple damages that the deficit discourse causes poor students and students of color attending urban schools, some have signaled that this

discourse can also negatively affect teachers in urban schools (e.g., Weiner, 1993, 2003). For example, the deficit discourse can make teachers feel helpless or ineffective; urban teachers “themselves have been silenced over time” (Fine, 1992, p. 121). Fine (1992) highlights “that correlational evidence (Fine 1983b) suggests that educators who feel most disempowered in their institutions are most likely to believe that ‘these kids can’t be helped’” (Fine, 1992, p. 121). Weiner (2003) notes that when an administration strictly regulates urban teachers, teachers can feel inadequate and, in turn, believe their students to be inadequate.

This project especially aligns itself with scholars working to theorize the *connections* between neoliberal and deficit discourses. Drawing these two discourses together seems productive in disrupting the teachers-versus-students (and parents) trap that we get caught in when education is perceived to be in crisis—when we say the nation is at risk—and someone has to be the scapegoat. I do not mean to argue that urban teachers are harmed by the racialized deficit discourse *just like urban students*. I do not want to lose the conceptual power or the particularity of the deficit discourse by arguing that all kinds of blame are part of deficit discourse. Indeed, neoliberal logics seem to account for much of the blame directed at teachers, while deficit thinking accounts for the blame placed on urban students. As Valencia (1997, 2010) recognized, the deficit model works to pathologize urban students along the lines of the psychological behavioral or medical model of describing, explaining, predicting, and treating supposed deficits. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) argue that neoliberal testing policies also adhere to this logic. For instance, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) constructs teaching, as was stated by former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, as “prescribing an instructional cure” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 681). Thus, neoliberalism might *intensify* the deficit view of students; poor students and students of color, already largely seen through the deficit discourse as “ailing from lack of skills” (p. 681), come to be constructed more thoroughly as ailing in this era of hyper-accountability. While all teachers must “treat” students and get “healthy” test scores in this audit culture, urban teachers become responsible for the, in a sense, the seemingly doubly “sick” urban students.

Disrupting Discourse: Considering Teachers’ Critical Talk as a Form of Agency

Part of my task as a critical researcher is to connect urban teachers’ stories to the “structural conditions that influenced the interpretations teachers made of their experiences” (Biklen, 1995, p. 50). This means I need to take not only their voices seriously, but also the discourses that help to produce their voices. Drawing on theorists like Foucault (1979), de Certeau (1984), and Sawicki (1994) is helpful to conceptualize teachers’ agency without letting go of an analysis of the power of dominant discourses. I recognize the structural conditions of urban schooling and the neoliberal, deficit, and other dominant discourses that are central to the organization of daily life in schools, on the one hand; but de Certeau’s (1984) concept of *making do* allows me to get at how teachers reproduce and interrupt, resist and maintain the structures and discourses of urban schooling, on the other hand. In order to keep teachers’ power relative to their students in the forefront, I approach teachers as pivot figures working within complex fields of power. Studying urban teachers means I neither study only up nor study only down; urban teachers are neither fully oppressors nor wholly victims. (People rarely are.) I examine how urban teachers at some moments use *strategies*—“ways of operating” afforded to those in power—to uphold deficit and neoliberal discourses (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30), and at other moments use *tactics*—the “art of the weak”—to creatively “make use of the cracks” in dominant discourses, and to take the “order by surprise” (p. 37).

While some feminist and other critical scholars have critiqued Foucault for forgoing a conception of agency, feminist philosopher Sawicki (1994) argues that Foucault maintains a theory of agency. While Foucault believes that we do have a “modern sensibility” and that we cannot somehow step outside of power, history or discourse, “this does not mean that one cannot attempt to bring to light the anonymous historical processes through which this sensibility was constituted in an effort to create a critical distance to it” (Sawicki, 1994, p. 351). Sawicki shows that, for Foucault, agency is precisely the ability to “bring to light” this constitutiveness, and to point to and—if only fleetingly—“free a space for the invention of new forms of rationality and experience” (pp. 352-3). Sawicki quotes Foucault in a footnote, explaining that criticism can be a starting point for transformation:

There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits... Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed... [A]s soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (p. 362)

Urban teachers’ negotiation with both deficit and neoliberal discourses was visible in what I am calling *critical talk*. I coded as critical talk the times when teachers critiqued particular school practices or approaches to education. Examining the critical talk of teachers means taking teachers’ perspectives seriously—hearing their talk *as critique* and not as mere complaints, for instance—and it highlights both constraint and agency. *Teachers’ critical talk is a moment when teachers create a space for other possible constructions of schooling*. Studying teachers’ critical talk includes multiple considerations: (a) acknowledging the constraints which teachers currently face; (b) recognizing that things could be otherwise; (c) and examining the discourses that shape *both* their critique and their ideas for how the *otherwise* space of possibility is filled up.

Critique conceived of in this multifaceted way emphasizes the agency of the teachers. Studying their critical talk disrupts the teacher-is-to-blame explanation (Kumashiro, 2012) that sees teachers as only objects at fault, and it instead works to position them as subjects of their experiences. Even when teachers felt a lack of control over their work, their critical talk demonstrates how they are never merely or totally objects of controlling discourses. If power both “breaks [the body] down and rearranges it” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138), then in the instance of rearrangement or reproduction, there is a space to at least imagine a different possibility of rearrangement. de Certeau (1984) also uses this metaphor of carving out space and using “cracks” in the dominant order to designate a kind of agency (p. 37).

While teachers’ critical talk highlights this both/and moment of present realities and future possibilities, it may not always lead to transformation. Indeed, the urban teachers I interviewed often seemed to trade one controlling discourse for another. Their complex negotiation with discourses—the ease with which a critique or disruption of one constraining discourse led to teachers activating another—illuminates the intersectional (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989) and interlocking (Combahee River Collective, 2004) nature of power. Thus, it is important to study how neoliberal and deficit discourses intertwine in teachers’ talk, even while trying to examine each discourse individually. Educational researchers have focused on the deficit discourse’s harm for students and on neoliberalism’s harm primarily for teachers as workers, but taking stock of how these discourses function together helps to disrupt the popular teachers-versus-

students framework, as well as helps to imagine possibilities to recreate urban schools that are for *both* students and teachers.

Urban Teachers' Critical Talk: Navigating Deficit and Neoliberal Constraints

"...I found myself battling for the things that didn't matter a lot, and then before you knew it I was always in battle, and then the things that did matter started to slip, big time." –Andre, TFA teacher

As the urban teachers talked to me about their daily school lives, the complexity of their work was evident. Here, I examine instances of teachers' critical talk and explore teachers' understanding of the constraints they faced. Of course, the urban teachers in this study critiqued a variety of things and from a variety of perspectives—a school's administration, other teachers' pedagogical approaches, a curriculum that promoted assimilation, students who did not assimilate enough, an overemphasis on student discipline, not enough focus on student discipline, and many others. However, many of urban teachers' critiques centered on neoliberal effects. Teachers felt they had little control over school schedules and how they spent their time, and they were restricted by the continuous pressures to raise students' test scores. I make a distinction between these kinds of constrictions and the times when teachers constructed urban students *themselves* to be obstacles or constraints to their work. Indeed, as I discuss the data on critical talk, I want to suggest that in understanding urban students as problems—taking the deficit approach—teachers lost sight of the true structures and practices that compelled them and shaped their work. In other words, it was not *these kids* who made teaching difficult, but it was the explanatory power of the deficit discourse that produced these students *as problems* that contributed to some of the teachers' struggles; the deficit framework overemphasized urban students as the cause of school troubles and misdirected the critiques and concerns that teachers had about their work.

In one example of critical talk, Christine, a teacher from Project Voice, disagreed with district administrators' understanding of her work. Christine said that all she heard from the district level was talk about the number of chairs in the classroom. She was upset that the administrators conceived of teachers' jobs in the neoliberal terms of accounting—counting students and expecting certain outcomes based on a teacher-student ratio. Christine disagreed that class size was everything. This teacher knew her work was more complex than that, and for a higher-up to understand the main problem with schools in terms of counting empty seats infuriated her. However, she then reframed the problem as *these kids* in these seats. She was upset that the administrator did not understand that her job was complicated because she had to deal with students she called *these kids*. Again, I came to interpret this *these-kids* language as a raced and classed code to express deficit thinking about urban students without explicitly employing raced language (Watson, 2011), a code that teachers in the study used repeatedly. Christine's critical talk begins to disrupt neoliberal accounting logics, but in the space that her critique opens up, deficit thinking sneaks in; counting seats might make sense if she were teaching the so-called normal kids rather than this urban population.

In another interview with Christine, she discussed the challenges she faces in an urban district and the pressures of being designated as persistently low achieving (PLA). Here, she seems to fight the deficit discourse that gives up on *these kids* and that sees them as helpless, but her

critique of the harsh controls placed on urban schools winds its way back to the responsibility of individual urban families:

- Christine: You're being punished for being a city school teacher instead of getting a job in the suburbs. I don't think suburbs are the Promised Land. I guess what I'll say, if you teach an at-risk population you're being penalized. I really believe... My co-worker... we were saying this the other day. She said this school is full of good teachers, but you wouldn't know it based on our results. I don't think that's a cop out. There could be some people sitting back going, "This is really hard, and how can you expect me to do better? What I'm up against. Look at these kids." I'm not talking about people that have that approach. I said to my students last year... this was kind of an interesting thing. They were really acting up... I asked them, "Do you know why our school ... why everything changed? Because you know I'm a new teacher, and you know there's lots of new teachers. We were put on a state list. Do you know about that?" They were like, "Yeah. But we don't know what..." They're fourth graders. I said, "We're called a low-achieving school. I said that means that we're not doing a good enough job, teachers or students. That we have to work hard, and we have to learn what we need to know as fourth graders." This one kid says to me... Oh no, when I asked the question at first, their response to me was when I said, "Why did we change the school?" is, "Because we're bad." I said, "Really?" Then I went on and I explained about the PLA, and we have to do more and all this stuff. This other kid said, "That's why no one new comes to this school."
- Heidi: No one new?
- Christine: No new kids choose to come to this school. That was pretty telling. It's like, no one wants to come here.
- Heidi: So did they..? How do you think they meant bad?
- Christine: "We're bad kids. We're bad overall." When you look around, if I've got kids that are all acting out and they don't have any good role models... I truthfully look at kids in my class and think, your family needs to get you out of here.

Christine distances herself from teachers who have the mentality of, "Look 'what I'm up against. Look at these kids.'" She also notices a disconnect between what she and her colleagues see as a school full of good teachers and bad results, but she seems to buy into the authority of the PLA label and believes that she and the students have to, in fact, work hard. Further, she seems to latch onto the deficit logic that sees urban students' families as lacking—in this case, lacking "good role models"—and *simultaneously* latches onto the individualistic and middle-class approach that assumes parents can and should simply choose another school. This kind of thinking is supported in the neoliberal policies of choice and vouchers, as well (Kumashiro, 2012).

Erica, a TFA corps member who worked in Chicago during her two-year commitment, is another teacher who engaged in a critique of various aspects of her work. Her critical talk of her experiences with testing, especially, reveals how tightly linked neoliberal and deficit discourse can be. Elsewhere, I have written about Erica describing herself as a "numbers person" (Pitzer,

2014a). When she began TFA, she very much believed in testing as a measure of teacher effectiveness. Erica, like some other urban teachers in the study, struggled to reconcile her negative experiences with testing—she was not asked back to her school after her first year in TFA because of student scores—with her perspective that testing *should* be tied to her performance. While she did become critical of tests, she was critical in particular ways that ended up relying on a deficit view of students and that allowed the neoliberal logic of accountability to endure:

- Erica: Going into Teach For America, I was so excited that they're using numbers and performance, and this and that, and going into it, I was just like, "Duh! If you're a teacher, you should be good at it, and your kids should be making all this progress," and like, it made so much sense to me. But after *doing* it, it's like... Okay, I had a kid who came in the day of our spring test...
- Heidi: Right.
- Erica: ...and he had gotten into a fight with his mom that morning, he hadn't had breakfast, he was angry, and he was one of my students who had a 504 plan for his behavior. He had explosive personality disorder, and so all of these things—what would have been like a brush-off-your-shoulder day for anyone else was like enough to make him self-sabotage his test.
- Heidi: Yeah.
- Erica: I was able to convince my principal to let him postpone taking the test for two days.... But really, like my job performance is tied to *this kid*.

Rather than stick with her growing critique of testing, Erica invokes the deficit language of *these kids*—or *this kid*—signaling that testing *should* work with some students, but not urban students who lack breakfast, who have fighting families, who are angry, and who have apparent disorders. The power of neoliberalism makes testing and performance *the* educational framework, and Erica wants to be successful according to these measurements. To protect herself from blame for poor testing outcomes, she can easily draw on the deficit discourse that is so available to shift the blame onto urban students. Her talk reinscribes urban students as lacking and constructs them as *unworthy* to be tested, allowing both the deficit discourse and neoliberal logics to continue to operate.

Teachers' critical talk suggests that the neoliberal demand for teachers to use time efficiently also intensifies when they are teaching urban students with presumed behavioral and academic deficiencies. If students are on the verge of becoming out-of-control at any moment and are perpetually behind or below benchmarks, the neoliberal logic to maximize time becomes more entrenched. The language around making progress, progressing at adequate increments, getting behind, and being behind grade level, was prevalent in teachers' accounts of their work. These hallmarks of neoliberal time and their impacts on teachers' work are worth examining on their own, but perhaps even more significant to consider is what happens when these ways of marking time intertwine with deficit constructions of urban students.

As a TFA corps member, Andre had taught at an urban Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school that he said conceived of and measured knowledge by time: "We want you to learn about two years' worth of information in one year." This mode of time shaped learning as something to get through quickly, but it also impacted how student behavior was controlled and understood.

Andre was critical of KIPP's focus on discipline and control, and many of his students were, too, but he thought school leaders actually made an effort to justify to students why they set up such strict rules. Here he explains that if the focus on discipline seemed like overkill; it was just because they needed to maximize learning time:

I think the way they communicated it to the students.... [The administration] almost admitted that it was unnecessary, but it was a good sacrifice to make to keep things in order and moving quickly so that you can maximize your learning time. A big appeal that they were always making to the students was, "We don't have much time. Not all of you, but a lot of you are behind, and we want you to learn about two years' worth of information in one year. We're transparent about that, even to you, little kid. So, do these things so we can get through the information quicker, and you can stuff more info into your head."

A banking approach to "get through the information quicker" and "stuff more info into your head" does not allow for a lot of relational learning or knowledge-building together between teachers and students, but it also raises the stakes for what is considered student misbehavior. This pressure to *get through quickly* means any student input or question can be construed as misbehavior. Despite Andre's efforts to not focus on controlling student behavior, and despite the administration's intentions for student progress, the logics of neoliberal efficiency position students as objects of control. In other words, even when educators are able to disrupt the deficit discourse and its rationale for controlling poor students and students of color, neoliberal discourses of efficiency can offer other justifications for control.

Later in this same interview, Andre reflected on what he saw as his struggle with student misbehavior, and he illuminated a relationship between the impulse to tightly control students' (and teachers') time and the pressure to control their behavior. He said that student discipline was one of the challenges in his first year of teaching through TFA:

Andre: I think it was student discipline. I struggled tremendously. Basically, when you're not organized—and I wasn't organized the second semester—the discipline is probably the first thing that falls apart because the kids are waiting for you. In their other classes, they're used to the 50-minute period moving like that [snaps his fingers]. They're just used to... I think it was actually 90-minute periods at the KIPP School when I was there. They're used to one thing after the other. They're like, "Look under your seat. Oh, there's a packet taped under your seat." Not that serious, but I'm using that to illustrate...

Heidi: And then someone comes and does high-kicks through the...

Andre: Right, just everything planned, mapped out, and executed perfectly. My execution was like, "Oh, where are those papers? I can't find them," and in the meantime one kid throws a piece of paper at another kid, and another kid is like, "What! I'm going to kick your ass!" Those were the kinds of things that happened when the teacher was looking for stuff. I would try to delegate responsibility, like, "Here's this packet. You keep this in your desk. As soon as I look at you, you pass them out," and on my good days, where I got eight hours of sleep, that's what my class would look like. But on my normal days, where I got six or five, it was a mess.

That's when behavior and discipline got out of control; the students started slouching and almost fighting.

Underlying his concerns about discipline is the notion that each moment must be accounted for; Andre and the other teachers at the school must be *on* at all times. Of course, being prepared and organized is important for any classroom to run smoothly, but this level of execution and management of every minute not only reflects a view of students as passive learners, but it also reflects a deficit view of students who will become out-of-control if given a moment of freedom or a moment without direction from the teacher. Rather than learning as an engaging process for students, learning becomes more like a controlled string of tasks that the teacher asks the students to get through efficiently—and without their supposed inclination toward misbehavior (gasp—slouching!) cropping up. Andre was critical of this quick, one-thing-after-another pace, and he recognized the constraints it put on him. However, instead of sticking to his critique—instead of using tactics to disrupt this dominant discourse around time and perhaps imagine how classroom time could be structured differently—it seemed easier to follow the strategy or logics provided by the deficit discourse that time must be structured this way because urban students' behavior was bound to get out of control (de Certeau, 1984).

When I had made the remark to Andre about teachers doing high-kicks through the classroom, I was thinking back to an earlier focus group that I and other researchers had held with the Project Voice teachers. These teachers, Christine and Jack, were also critical of the getting-through mode of learning, and Christine said she felt pressure to be an entertainer:

Christine: ...there's this sense that we're either having fun *or* we're doing math. You know what I mean?

(There are a couple of reaffirming “mm-hmms” and nods from the group.)

Christine: And I feel like it's getting more and more like that, and I mean this is something I do all the time; I'm trying to figure out, “Okay, how do I get them to do this but not see it as something to just be done with?” And this is constant, and I feel like it gets worse.

Sari (researcher): I think that's the key, in fact.

Christine: I've joked... I've joked that I feel like, you know, I'm an entertainer (laughing) which I'm not, but I think in your (gesturing toward another teacher) class, I remember one time I had them, and I was teaching something, and I was like, “Never mind, get up!” You know, and they... I thought, “I'm nuts” (laughter from others). I'm spending my time going, “Okay, what do we do now? This isn't working.”

Christine felt like she had to be on at all times and continually jumping from activity to activity, task to task. We should expect teachers to be on, but I can hear from Christine the lack of meaning and control that she has in choosing how to teach and what to spend her time on. She had said at another point in this focus group, “I feel like a three-ring circus.” She wanted to make teaching fun and meaningful for her students so they would not disengage and waste time, and she wanted them to make progress, but she also resisted the idea that learning was “something to just be done with.”

While I had heard Christine's comment that “it's getting more and more like that” as a hint that she was noticing a heightened sense of pressure to be continually productive and efficient, it

seems like she also slipped into a deficit framework that blamed urban students for the change. From her perspective, the constant need to “just be done with” tasks seemed worse, not just because she was experiencing a shift toward neoliberal values and practices, but also because she was getting more of *these kids* in her classroom:

- Christine: I think more and more we’re getting these kids. I’ve joked that you used to have a few kids that were on you, wanted your attention. Now it’s like half the class is on you. They want your attention, and, you know, usually you think kindergartens, first graders, it’s more physical than fourth, fifth, sixth. But fourth grade, they’re on me, you know, they want *you*, they want your attention. *Or* they don’t want anything or depending on the time of day they want this stuff; they don’t want to have anything to do with learning. So how do you bring it to learning?
- Jack: Because all that matters is next week, the testing.
- Christine: Right!
- Jack: Test scores.
- Sari: That’s right.
- Christine: That’s just it, and I think that stinks! It’s completely... We’re not teaching, if we’re preparing them for... Well no, I shouldn’t say that. I have always felt that if you teach well they’ll be ready for any test. Well, that’s not really realistic anymore because if we’re teaching here and their skill level is here (gesturing with hands), you can’t get them here if you don’t take care of this, but you’re being demanded, it’s being demanded that this is where you are. And it’s unrealistic, and then if you take into account other things like ESL students? That’s just downright criminal that they’re making them take these tests.
- Jack: Christine and I were talking...
- Christine: It’s endless!

Christine and Jack weave back and forth between a critique that directly targets an overemphasis on testing, and a critique that implicitly targets urban children. When teachers are under pressure to address a lot in a little time, it becomes easy for them to blame urban students—seen as needy and suffering from a lack of adequate attention from parents.

In highlighting teachers’ talk about time and progress, I am not suggesting that students and teachers should somehow not be making progress, or that students and teachers should not have some level of accountability over time. Rather, I am concerned about how efficiency and productivity have become *the* central goals, and how a neoliberal conception of time changes the process of teaching and learning. Teachers had to navigate between the ever-present call for progress that is a top-down, artificial kind of accountability and is more about surveillance, and the kinds of progress that *they* wanted to make and found meaningful. Although these urban teachers were critical of testing and the ways it has shifted teaching toward a getting-through mode, the legitimacy of this mode of efficiency persisted in part because the deficit discourse was so available to construct *these kids* as the real problem.

Conclusion

Deficit discourse, of course, is powerful on its own. It operates beyond the walls of urban schools to construct youth of color as deficient in many contexts, and it is employed by people other than urban educators. This project demonstrates that neoliberal logics are helpful for the perpetuation of deficit thinking within urban schools, but not necessary. However, this study suggests that, for these urban teachers, deficit and neoliberal discourses intertwined in their understandings of their work. Rose (2009) recognizes that while "... 'qualified teachers' are praised in public documents and speeches, teachers are often pegged as the problem" (p. 57). A few short years ago, Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and other education policy makers and researchers claimed in their "manifesto" that public schools are places *for* teachers and *for* unions, and not students ("How to Fix Our Schools", 2010), but neoliberal and deficit discourses help to produce urban schools that are for *neither* student nor teacher. Even as they are different, urban teachers' struggles are interconnected with their students' struggles. Without taking stock of how these discourses buttress one another, teachers like Erica may start with a critique of testing—that constrains both her and her students—only to have that critique squashed by deficit thinking that comes along to legitimize that testing works, just not with *these kids*.

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ⁱ Project Voice is a pseudonym. Upstate City and the names of all teacher participants are pseudonyms, as well.